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Special Report

Tunisia's Problems

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TUNISIA'S PROBLEMS

As President Habib Bourguiba begins his third five-year term, he is faced with waning health and vigor, and with a host of foreign and domestic problems.

The coup in Libya has revived Bourguiba's long-held fears that Nasir will come to dominate Libya. He is apprehensive that the moderate Tunisian regime, threatened now by two radical neighbors, is more vulnerable than ever. The Tunisian President continues to be worried about Soviet activities in Algeria and the Mediterranean, and is seeking ways to upgrade his security forces. These considerations have aroused concern among Tunisian officials about the adequacy of the protection afforded by Tunisia's close ties with the West. Bourguiba, outspokenly pro-Western, wants to strengthen those ties, but he and his associates can be expected to watch developments closely and to weigh their options carefully in coming months.

Bourguiba is concerned also with the need to accelerate the country's economic development, to increase production, to provide employment for an expanding population, and to liquidate a burgeoning foreign debt. On the other hand, he has encountered a strong undercurrent of resentment against the government's paternalistic role in the economy—particularly in agriculture—and is being subjected to strong pressures to relax controls. Last summer, he reversed the policy of forcing all agricultural producers into cooperatives and subsequently demoted economic czar Ahmed ben Salah, who had originated the unpopular measure. At present, Bourguiba is most immediately preoccupied with the need to reconstruct the country's vital transportation and communications networks, disrupted by a month of disastrous floods.

Bourguiba's supremacy within the country's only legal political organization, the Destourian Socialist Party, remains unchallenged, but there may already be considerable jockeying for position among potential successors.

BACKGROUND

The dynamic 66-year-old President, whom Tunisians affectionately term "le supreme combattant," has been in the forefront of Tunisian nationalist activity since he was a student in Paris in the 1920s. During the next decade, he and a group of like-minded young activists, unable to dominate the nationalist Destour (Constitution) Party founded by their fathers, broke away to organize the Neo-Destour Party, which for more

than 20 years campaigned for the termination of the protectorate France had imposed on Tunisia in 1881.

A few months before Tunisia gained its independence in March 1956, the Western-oriented Bourguiba outmaneuvered the Neo-Destour's brilliant pan-Arabist secretary general, Salah ben Youssef.

Ben Youssef was expelled from the party and continued his personal vendetta against

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Bourguiba from exile until he was assassinated in Germany in 1961. A Neo-Destour and labor coalition handily won all 98 seats in a constituent assembly elected a few days after independence, and Bourguiba was named premier.

Bourguiba became the country's provisional president when the assembly declared Tunisia a republic in mid-1957. He thereafter combined the duties of chief of state and head of government, and still does. Bourguiba closely supervised the drafting of the constitution—adopted in 1959—which was strongly influenced by the constitutions of the US and Turkey (1945). As was to be expected it provides for a strong executive and a unicameral National Assembly with limited responsibilities. Both the president and the assembly are elected simultaneously at five-year intervals by universal suffrage from lists drawn up by the Destourian Socialist Party (the renamed Neo-Destour). No one has ever attempted to compete for the presidency, and there is little if any choice offered for the assembly. The electorate can and does vote against an individual candidate by striking his name off the ballot. The third and most recent presidential election took place on 2 November.

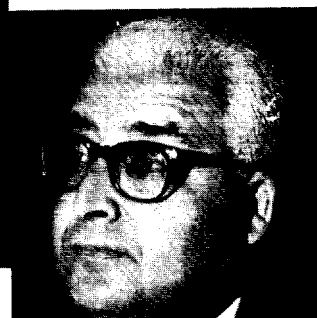
BOURGUIBA DOMINATES TUNISIAN POLITICS

For nearly 14 years, Bourguiba has ruled as a benevolent autocrat. Widely popular, he is an articulate spokesman for realism, moderation, and responsibility. His political acuity, unmatched among his associates, has kept him in firm control of party and governmental machinery.

Bourguiba enjoys playing a paternal role, wheedling, cajoling, and lecturing his "subjects" on manners, morals, obligations, and duties. Until recently, when his health began to deteriorate, he relished rubbing elbows with the crowds who always surrounded him during public appearances and to make long, extemporaneous speeches. An enlightened leader, he has taken liberal positions on issues such as the emancipation of women, birth control, and religious reform, although this has frequently spread anguish among less enlightened Tunisians.



Habib Bourguiba



Bahi Ladgham

Bourguiba's health has never been robust, and his activities were circumscribed after he suffered a heart attack in early 1967.

He has come to rely more heavily, therefore, on Bahi Ladgham, a long-time associate who bears the official title of secretary of state for the presidency. Ladgham's administrative responsibilities were increased when the government was reorganized in September, and for all practical purposes he now functions as prime minister. As secretary general of the Destourian

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Socialist Party, Ladgham is also Bourguiba's principal lieutenant in party affairs.

Marxist propaganda may gain greater currency among Tunisia's increasingly restless youth.

MAJOR POLICY PROBLEMS

Bourguiba's foreign policy is openly Western oriented, although he maintains correct diplomatic relations with the USSR and cordial relations with some other Eastern European governments. He antagonized De Gaulle by the brusque means he used to secure the evacuation of French military forces in 1964 and to recover French-held agricultural lands. He has had a long-standing feud with Nasir, primarily because Cairo had extended financial support and had given asylum to Bourguiba's arch foe, Salah ben Youssef, but also because Bourguiba challenged Nasir's claim to be the spokesman for the Arab states and has resisted the expansion of Nasir's influence into North Africa.

He is also apprehensive about expanding Soviet activities in the Mediterranean and Algeria. He has been outspoken in his criticism of events such as the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, and of diplomatic breaks by some Arab states with the UK, West Germany, and the US. Because of his firm support of the US, Bourguiba is accused by critics at home and abroad of being an "imperialist lackey."

The Libyan coup jolted the Tunisians, even though it was not entirely unexpected. They saw in it confirmation of their fear that security commitments from the West are no guarantee against the spread of radical Arab influence. Such attacks of acute anxiety are not new, and persist despite the basic domestic popularity of the Tunisian Government and the absence of serious unrest in the country. Bourguiba is uneasy not only because he now feels surrounded by potentially aggressive Arab radicals, but also because he fears

The Tunisians have decided for the present to try to cultivate good relations with the new Libyan regime in the hope that it may prove less of a monster than it initially appeared. Meanwhile, Bourguiba continues to urge greater Maghreb unity, which he sees as a counterweight to Nasir's influence. In this, he has received some encouragement lately from the Algerians, who were relatively restrained in their reaction to the Libyan coup, played a constructive role in the recently concluded Islamic Summit, and made the gesture of sending flood-relief supplies to Tunisia even though parts of Algeria were also hard hit by flooding.

Bourguiba frankly expects certain benefits from his close, personal friendship with the US, his courageous support of US policies that are generally condemned throughout the Arab world, and his position as a moderate among the non-aligned nations. All this, he believes, obligates the US, in particular, and its friends in Western Europe to concern themselves with Tunisia's problems and to be generous with their economic, political, and military support and assistance. Bilateral and multilateral exchanges now under way on Tunisia's problems are therefore likely to continue.

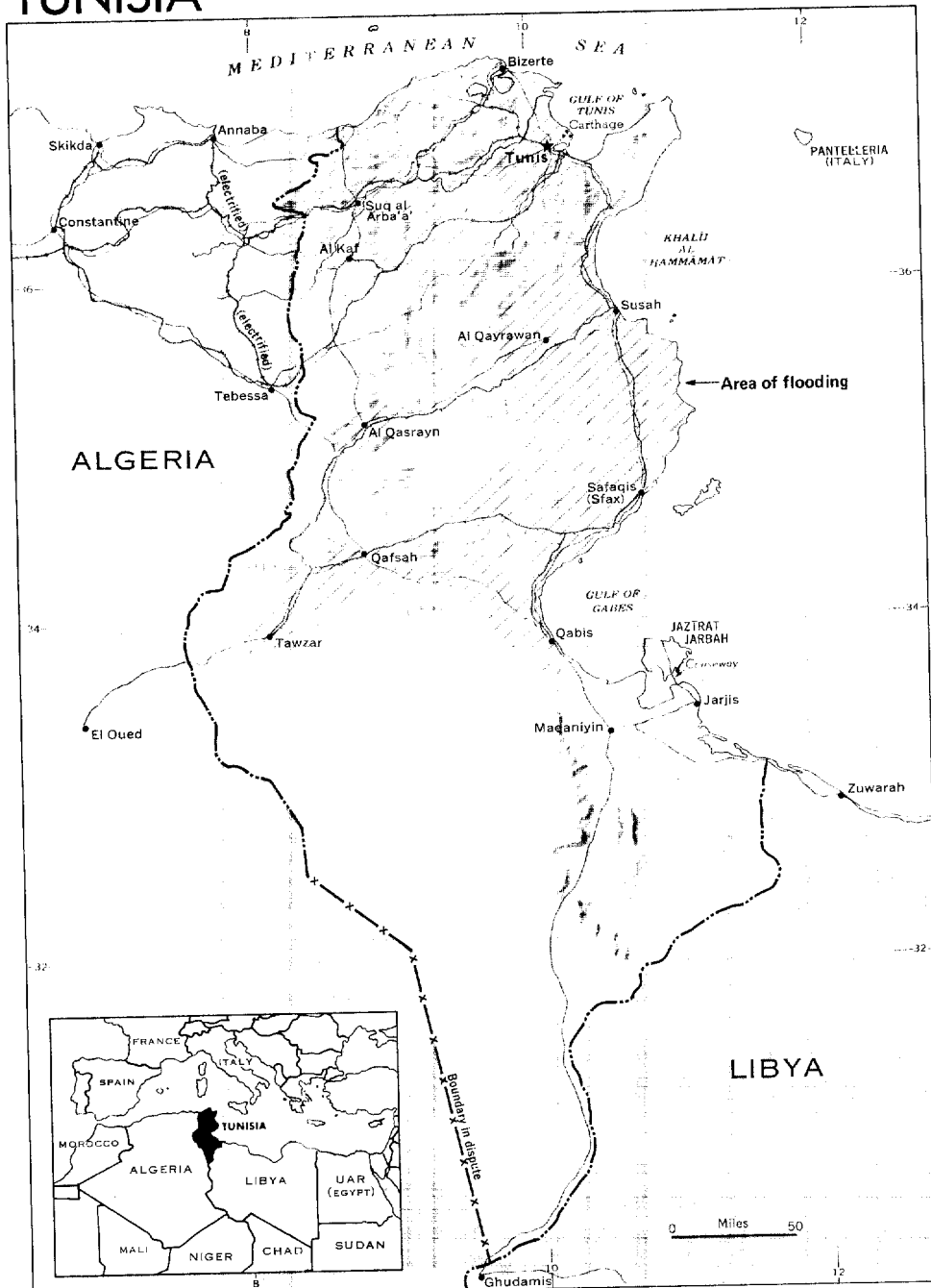
A revamping of Tunisia's economic structures is also being undertaken. In 1961, Tunisia embarked on an economic, social, and psychological program, termed by its leaders a "white revolution," aimed at producing a new and modern nation. To this end, state controls have gradually been extended over every aspect of the society and economy. At first, Bourguiba solidly backed Ben Salah's efforts to restructure the economy. He looked on the program of forming agricultural cooperatives not only as the keystone in the

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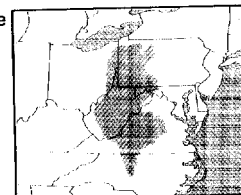
TUNISIA



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Comparative Area

Republic of Tunisia
 Area: 63,400 sq. miles
 Population: 4,800,000
 Religion: 98% Muslim



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social revolution, but also as one of his greatest achievements and one that could continue as a living monument to him. Nevertheless, the agricultural cooperative program foundered, primarily because of the rapid pace at which it was implemented: Ben Salah was attempting to do in one year what at the previous rate would have taken 28 years. His goal apparently was to complete the program before the meeting of the congress of the Destourian Socialist Party, which had been scheduled for 9 October but is now indefinitely postponed.

When Bourguiba realized that his "monument" was in danger of becoming a major fiasco, he was persuaded to revise the program. Much agriculture is being returned to private hands, although some established cooperatives, mainly in the north, will continue. The scuttling of much of the agricultural program, however, has raised hopes in other sectors of the economy and society that other controls will be relaxed. Even before the revision of the agricultural policy was announced, some members of the retail merchants' cooperatives were attempting to reopen their small shops. The information media are eager for the lifting of press restrictions, and there are also rumblings of expected change in commercial and industrial cooperatives. The government, however, has thus far indicated that it intends to hold the line.

DISSATISFACTION STEMS FROM SEVERAL SOURCES

Although the government's over-all position seems solid enough, discontent with the regime has erupted on several occasions since independence and has been countered with stern and sometimes Draconian measures. Dissatisfaction centers on political and economic controls, on Bourguiba's policy toward the Middle East, and on his support for US policy in Vietnam. A few hard-

core opponents, most of them disciples of the late Salah ben Youssef or involved in the plot discovered in late 1962 to assassinate Bourguiba, are active in exile.

Student dissatisfaction stems mainly from the firm control imposed over the student organization by the Destourian Socialist Party, but also reflects opposition to Bourguiba's moderate policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict and his support for US policy in Vietnam. Students were among those accused of fomenting the vicious anti-Jewish rioting in Tunis in June 1967, during which the British Embassy was sacked and the US Embassy damaged. A student strike in March 1968, precipitated by the sentencing of a student to 20 years' imprisonment, resulted in wholesale arrests among students and faculty members at the University of Tunis. When those detained were brought to trial last fall, the government developed extensive evidence of active student dissidence but little to substantiate its contention of a plot against the regime. Recently, when student leaders attempted to voice their opposition to the backing off from the cooperative agricultural policy, they were called in by Presidency Secretary Ladgham, who "helped them put the policy changes in focus."

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Farmer riots in several rural localities earlier this year

highlighted the prevalent dissatisfaction over the policy of forcing all agricultural production into cooperatives.

This sharp dissatisfaction, combined with low productivity on the part of many of the cooperatives

persuaded the government to call a halt. Ahmed ben Salah, originator of the policy, was replaced

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as secretary of state for planning and economic affairs, and his functions were divided among several officials.

There has also been some grumbling among the educated elite and the propertied middle class over the pervasive controls and the austerity measures instituted by the government, as well as discontent among some labor leaders over the subordination of Tunisia's General Union of Tunisian Workers to party control. The sacking of Ben Salah also caused discontent among the handful of moderate leftists who were closely involved with him in furthering the cooperative program.

As preparations for the elections got under way last month, a flurry of excitement was caused by the unexpected challenge of the former secretary of state for defense, Ahmed Mestiri. Expelled from the party early in 1968 for criticizing the regime's economic policies and for announcing his resignation at a press conference, Mestiri questioned whether Bourguiba's health would permit him to continue his heavy responsibilities and indicated that he himself might form a ticket to run for the assembly. Mestiri, under ordinary circumstances, might have commanded considerable middle-class, conservative, and labor support

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Mestiri's most probable ally, former labor chief Habib Achour, immediately repudiated this initiative, however, and Mestiri reconsidered and did not seek election after all. The move, nevertheless, caused the party to scrutinize and revise the electoral candidates so that the strongest possible united front would be presented.

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particularly since the Libyan coup. Bourguiba has always maintained tight civilian control over the military. Members of the

armed forces are barred from political affiliation, receive little publicity, and exert virtually no influence on government policy. Some dissatisfaction does exist among armed forces personnel, who complain that they get second-class treatment from the government.

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a re-evaluation of US military assistance—both material and training—and for increased military assistance from Western Europe.

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THEN CAME THE FLOODS

Tunisia's normal preoccupation with developing its economy in spite of limited resources, with increasing production and reducing a chronic trade deficit, and with holding down a growing foreign debt and maintaining economic austerity has been superseded by the immediate problems posed by unprecedented and disastrous floods that have prevailed throughout much of the country for over a month. More than 500 people have died and 150,000 have been left homeless. Transportation and communications facilities have been disrupted by the destruction of hundreds of miles of roads and railroads, and by the washing away of many bridges. A major concern is to repair the railroads quickly to ensure the continued flow of Tunisia's phosphates and iron ore. Temporary repairs may put the rail line to Tunis back in operation by the end of the year, but the railroad to Sfax is not expected to be back in service until spring, and over-all reconstruction will require several years. Tunisia will therefore suffer serious short-term losses in hard-currency export earnings, and will also lose important tourist revenues.

Spokesmen for the regime, most notably Presidency Secretary Ladgham and Foreign Secretary Habib Bourguiba, Jr., have stressed the need

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for quickly coping with the present emergency as well as for continuing to grapple with longer range economic problems. They are particularly concerned to forestall charges, presumably from the followers of Ben Salah and Mestiri, that the government is unequal to its task. To do so, Tunisia is seeking more aid from the US and Western Europe, already the major contributors to economic development.

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OUTLOOK

Although Bourguiba's health may preclude his playing as active a role as during the early years after independence, he probably will continue to wield the dominant influence over Tunisian affairs for some time to come. One of the most important political consequences of the change in economic policy, however, has been the tarnishing of the mystique of the Destourian Socialist Party and even of the President himself. This is most discernible among the elite, which, under the impetus of Mestiri's political initiative, is beginning to speculate freely about the post-Bourguiba period. The press is carrying more expressions of private opinion than before, and the "letters to the editor" columns are filled with a greater number of critical commentaries than previously.

Strengthening the private sector of the economy could have important implications. The re-

turn to free enterprise on a limited scale could stimulate greater political pluralism in Tunisia, although the head of Tunisia's labor organization does not believe the policy change has any implications for the future of trade unions in Tunisia.

The move away from cooperatives and the attendant political eclipse of Ben Salah may both be only temporary.

As a by-product of Ben Salah's demotion, the political left, including those who agreed with him as well as those who considered his policies not sufficiently socialistic, will probably become more critical of the government. The left is not at present large—mainly small numbers of party cadres, government technocrats, and students and teachers from the University—but it could become more important if and when the restraints on political expression are appreciably relaxed.

In any event, Tunisia is unlikely to resort again to the degree of pressure and constraint used to implement the cooperative program. The Tunisian people have shown that their docility has a threshold over which any government proceeds at its own risk, and Habib Bourguiba has shown that he remains sensitive to popular feeling.

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